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RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 3151
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RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA PRIORITY 0201
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001048

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: OPPOSITION LEADER ASSESSES THE CONFLICT

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JEFFREY J. LUNSTEAD FOR REASONS 1.4(b) and (d)
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¶1. (C) Summary. In a June 22 meeting with the Ambassador, Ranil Wickremesinghe, leader of the opposition United National Party (UNP), criticized the president's alliance with the Marxist Sinhalese chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). Wickremesinghe felt the president's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) could work with his own UNP to prepare a negotiating position to deal with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). However, Wickremesinghe was pessimistic about the possibility of the UNP and SLFP collaborating, suggesting instead that the president will remain bound to the JVP. End summary.

¶2. (C) On June 22 the Ambassador called on former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, leader of the opposition United National Party (UNP). Wickremesinghe said President Rajapaksa faces two choices: he can either continue to support the Marxist Sinhalese nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and look to that party for a Sinhalese chauvinist support base, or he can work with the UNP to create a long-term solution to Sri Lanka's conflict. Wickremesinghe felt Rajapaksa blames the JVP for unpopular policy decisions that the president actually supports, citing the JVP's opposition to the bill on restructuring the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) as one example. Wickremesinghe said the JVP's 39 seats in parliament are largely the result of government support, and the JVP should not be permitted to drive the agenda in resolving Sri Lanka's conflict. According to Wickremesinghe, the president always sees an alliance with the JVP as "the first option."

¶3. (C) The UNP attended the initial session of the President's All-Party Conference to build consensus on the ethnic issue, but Wickremesinghe now insists that the UNP will not attend further sessions until the GSL clarifies its position and recommits to the Tokyo Declaration, calling for a peaceful negotiated settlement with maximum devolution in a united Sri Lanka. Wickremesinghe believes that if his party and the president's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) could decide on a united negotiating posture to address the LTTE, the JVP would not be able to undermine the agreement. The Ambassador asked if, looking back, Wickremesinghe thought negotiations with the LTTE would have brought progress, or whether the LTTE would have returned to violence anyway, as they have now done. Wickremesinghe said that when he had

signed the Ceasefire Agreement in 2002, his plan had been to engineer a settlement that would appeal to the mass of Tamils, the Sinhalese, and the international community. This would have isolated the LTTE.

¶4. (C) Wickremesinghe asserted that some in the Government and the military believe a short, forceful military campaign could bring the LTTE to its knees. If they try that, however, they will fail, and the president "will be in trouble," perhaps having to bow to public pressure to hold parliamentary elections. In Wickremesinghe's view, elections would publicly signify that Rajapaksa has no viable solution to the conflict, and his party would lose the majority. The UNP would win the largest number of seats but not a majority, leaving a hung parliament.

¶5. (C) Wickremesinghe also criticized the Government of Sri Lanka's (GSL's) human rights record, alleging that high level officers such as defense secretary (and the president's brother) Gothabaya Rajapaksa and army chief Sarath Fonseka had given orders to target civilians. Wickremesinghe also claimed he had heard reports of Sri Lankan Army and LTTE-breakaway Karuna faction cadres holding Tamil businessmen for ransom. (Note: We have not heard this allegation before, but will attempt to check it out. End note.) Wickremesinghe said this is another reason why the UNP would not ally itself with the government. He felt the European Union, in tandem with its ban on the LTTE, should call the GSL to task over human rights violations.

¶6. (C) Comment: Wickremesinghe showed his usual mix of sharp political insights tempered with a self-centered approach focused on short-term political gains. He made it clear he

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will not cut the President any political slack, even at a time of national urgency. His comment that the Tigers would not agree to any peace settlement, but would have to be isolated, is particularly interesting.

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